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Ensemble delivers sizzling 'Summer'

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Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian. He was a young poet in a Renaissance pageboy's costume. She was a New Orleans grande dame with an exquisite sense of drama. Traipsing the globe with their own "little entourage of the beautiful and the talented and the young," they were inseparable -- carving out each fabulous day like a piece of sculpture.

Only now her son is gone, and she will do anything to protect his reputation. She'll bribe. She'll lobotomize. She'll go after family members with her walking cane like a vicious bird of prey.

Violet Venable -- the eccentric, pink-haired Southern matriarch at the center of Tennessee Williams' "Suddenly Last Summer" -- is one of the great dramatist's most memorable characters. So it's a delight to find her incandescent personality burning so brightly on the Actor's Express stage in the person of Shannon Eubanks. Long one of the city's most fascinating thespians, Eubanks delivers a Mrs. Venable for the ages -- with flights of mad enchantment, naughty behavior, fragile asthmatic gasps and one remarkably swift walking stick.

Nearly everything about director **Melissa Foulger's** production is first-rate: sets, costumes, lighting, sound and a powerhouse ensemble that finds Eubanks' real-life stepdaughter Kate Donadio in the role of Catharine, Violet's niece by marriage and possibly the only reliable witness to Sebastian's final hours.

Relatively short by Williams' standards, "Suddenly Last Summer" is a luxuriously written potboiler. Referencing everything from "Twelfth Night" to "The Picture of Dorian Gray," it's a battle royal over the Venable money, Sebastian's memory and Catharine's honor. In scenes that operate almost like monologues, Violet and Catharine take turns trying to seduce Dr. Cukrowicz (Joe Sykes) into buying their side of the story. On the sidelines, with their own mercenary agendas, are Catharine's mother (Jo Howarth) and

brother (Bobby Labartino) -- plus a nun (Erin Burnett) and a servant (Katie Aboudou).

You can see bits and pieces of Williams' tragic female psyche glinting in the gaudy, pathetic excess of Violet and the cat-on-the-ledge desperation of Catharine. As an exercise in compressed horror and poetry, "Suddenly Last Summer" is devastating. When it comes to mingling comedy and pathos, no one -- let me assure you all -- compares with Tennessee Williams.

THEATER REVIEW

"Suddenly Last Summer"

Grade: A

Through April 18. Actor's Express, King Plow Arts Center, 887 W. Marietta St., Suite J-107, Atlanta. 404-607-7469; actors-express.com

Photo

Eric Hermann

Joe Sykes (from left), Kate Donadio and Shannon Eubanks star in a first-rate production of Tennessee Williams' play.
